

# INTRODUCTION TO "COMMUNICATION AND CLASS DIVIDE CHINA" YUEZHI ZHAO

## Abstract

This introduction aims to accomplish two tasks. It first addresses the most important recent development in Chinese political communication by analysing the domestic and transnational dimensions of a multifaceted and high-stake communication war over the unfolding political drama centring on the explosive downfall of CCP Politburo member Bo Xilai and the crackdown on his "Chongqing Model" of development. It then uses this analysis as a backdrop to contextualise and introduce some of the main insights of the articles in this special issue on the one hand, and mobilises these insights to shed new light on the communication politics surrounding the Bo saga on the other. Communication, social consciousness, and class conflict over the future directions of China's transformation during the current turbulent period of globalised informational capitalism lies at the centre of this article and the entire special issue.

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In spring 2008, I could not have imagined what kind of political storm would hit China when I underscored the highly unstable and contested nature of communication politics in China by concluding my book, *Communication in China: Political Economy, Power, and Conflict*, with the popular Chinese saying, “The Trees Want to Be Quiet but the Winds Won’t Stop” (Zhao 2008a). Nor could I have imagined the magnitude of the ongoing political, social and intellectual conflicts in April 2010, when I closely followed the media and Internet sphere to make sense of a new turn in the “liberal versus new left” split in the form of a sensational media accusation of plagiarism against Wang Hui, China’s leading “new left” scholar. Above all, even though I have tried to analyse the tensions between China’s “neoliberal strategies” and “socialist legacies” (Zhao 2008b) in the reform process and their domestic and global ramifications in and through communication in my recent publications, I could not have imagined just how challenging it is in trying to be “as radical as reality itself” in this intellectual endeavour.

By spring 2012, the complicated intersections of China’s revolutionary legacies, elite divisions, central-local dynamics, popular discontents and inspirations, international geopolitics, not to mention the centrality of digitalised global communication flows, have created arguably one of the most epic thrillers in 21<sup>st</sup> century communication politics in and about China. As of this writing, the face of a close-eyed Bo Xilai, the leading protagonist in a Hollywood-style political drama spanning three continents and involving murder, betrayal, corruption, political intrigues, rumours of coup and everything else, had made it to the May 7, 2012 Asia edition of *Time* magazine. “Red Alert” is the cover title. Was Bo, a once-powerful “red princeling” – he is the son of a well-known Chinese revolutionary, really so close in bringing us back to the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with yet another “red revolution” (i.e. the Belsvelk Revolution) in the aftermath of yet another devastating global capitalist economic crisis? Or, was this just a farce or perhaps something in between? In this extended introduction, I first address the most important current development in Chinese political communication by analysing the domestic and transnational dimensions of a multifaceted and high stake communication war over the unfolding political drama centring on the explosive downfall of CCP Politburo member Bo and the crackdown on his “Chongqing Model” of political economic and social cultural development. I then use this analysis as a backdrop to contextualise and introduce the major themes of the articles in this special issue on the one hand, and mobilise some of key insights in the articles to shed new light on the domestic and global communication politics surrounding the Bo saga on the other. In this way, I also hope to update, extend and deepen my own previous research on communication and China. Communication, social consciousness, and class conflict over the future directions of China’s transformation during the current turbulent period of globalised capitalism lies at the centre of this introduction and the entire special issue.

### The Latest Explosion in Communication: The Ruling Class and Its Coordinates

At 11:00 p.m., April 10, 2012, China’s official Xinhua News Agency delivered what is now widely known as the “midnight fright” in the above-mentioned Hollywood-style real life political thriller. In a previous bombshell episode to this

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unfolding saga, which originated in the Southwestern metropolis Chongqing and had consumed the whole nation for more than two months, Bo, who had been seen as championing a more left-leaning reform agenda by his words and his socio-economic and cultural experiments in Chongqing, was dismissed as Chongqing's Party Secretary on March 15, 2012. Now, Xinhua's mid-night news announced that Bo, who had been thought of as a serious contender for a position at the CCP Politburo Standing Committee at the 18<sup>th</sup> National Congress late this year, had been further stripped of his national political posts as member of the CCP Central Committee and its Politburo. Moreover, he was under investigation for unspecified "serious violations of disciplines," while his wife Gu Kailai has been under detention on suspicion of murdering Neil Heywood, identified as a "British businessman" who had close connections with Bo's wife and son. CCTV, the CCP's television mouthpiece, concurrently broadcasted the news.

Xinhua's and CCTV's synchronised announcements, however shocking to the ordinary Chinese, were not news to members of China's ruling class – party-state officials of above division and county-levels. Earlier in the evening of April 10, 2012, the CCP central leadership, following the way in which it informed the nation about the shocking news about the death of Mao's heir-designated Lin Biao in a plane crash as he fled to the Soviet Union after an attempted coup against Mao in 1971, had broken the news among the ruling political class through emergency internal meetings in an attempt to contain the potentially regime-threatening ramifications of the news. Yet, underscoring a crucial difference between 1971 and now, the news had been leaked to the Chinese micro-blog sphere even before its official transmission within the ruling political class. In fact, the micro-blog sphere had been such an important communicative space and the "rumour machine" (Wang 2012) surrounding it had been such a powerful driver of the unfolding drama that, earlier in April 2012, central authorities had temporarily suspended the commentary function of China's two most popular micro-blog sites, Sina and Tencent, and arrested 6 netizens for spreading rumours about an attempt coup in Beijing implicating Politburo Standing Committee member Zhou Yongkang, a presumed ally of Bo. Authorities had also suspended as many as 16 websites, including major leftist websites such as Utopia and Maoflag, which could potentially voice any dissenting view on Bo's case.

With the possible exception of the immediate post-June 4, 1989 moment, the extent of news management and control had reached an unprecedented level in China's post-Mao era, an era that is supposed to bring an end to the political turmoil of the Mao era. The *People's Daily*, the CCP Central Committee's print mouthpiece, published strongly-worded editorials during the three consecutive days of April 11-13, 2012, trumpeting obedience to party disciplines and the "rule of law." Most importantly, these editorials urged the entire nation to unify thoughts and rally behind the CCP central leadership under Hu Jintao. In a media phenomenon that is reminiscent of the Cultural Revolution, these editorials were widely reprinted by newspapers all over the country. Moreover, in yet another political communication practice that is highly reminiscent of the Cultural Revolution era, media organisations all over the country were pressed to rally support for the party's decision to oust Bo. The *New York Times*, highlighting the manipulated nature of Chinese state propaganda, was quick to point out: this "has arguably been the greatest mobilisa-

tion to support a decision by the party since the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989” (Wong and Ansfield 2012).

Yet, ironically, it was Wen Jiabao, China’s Premier, who had accused Bo’s Chongqing leadership of trying to revive the Cultural Revolution at his news conference at the closing of the National People’s Congress on March 14, 2012, the day before Bo’s removal from his Chongqing post on March 15, 2012 (Wang 2012). To be sure, as I have demonstrated elsewhere, in media and Internet debates on the future directions of China’s transformation in the past decade, neoliberal forces have often deployed the Cultural Revolution as a lethal rhetorical weapon against their opponents (Zhao 2008a, 56, 323). But I could not have imagined that this rhetorical trope would be deployed at the highest political level by a seating Chinese Premier to attack the policy orientations of the Bo leadership in Chongqing. There is a further irony. Although the authorities arrested bloggers for spreading rumours about a coup attempt by Bo and his ally, other observers have pointed out that the actual coup might well be the one executed by those who successfully ousted Bo. As Lin Chun (2012) has written, while Bo’s reform model in Chongqing “is not fundamentally different from the national agenda of neoliberal global integration, it included more independent social policies. These proved so popular, it took what the *Financial Times* has called a ‘palace coup’ to crush it.”

Bo was not the first Politburo member to fall from grace in reform era China. In addition to CCP former general secretaries Hu Yaobang and Zhao Zhiyang before and during 1989, Beijing’s Chen Xitong and Shanghai’s Chen Liangyu were his predecessors in 1995 and 2006 respectively. However, judged from the level of news management and information control, it is clear that the central leadership had the most to fear from news about Bo’s downfall. The central authorities have not provided any official evidence against Bo; however, as if the central leadership had already realised the potential risks of Wen Jiabao’s political attack or perhaps signifying that “[t]he government doesn’t always seem sure which line to take on the affair” (Wang 2012), the April 10, 2012 announcements had effectively redefined Bo’s case as a disciplinary and perhaps even criminal one.

However, Bo is no ordinary deposed high-ranking CCP official, no matter how corrupt he might be. Unlike the two Chens, Bo had an ambitious, well-articulated, and popular reform program and an entire range of developmental and governmental experiments in Chongqing – described variously as the “Chongqing Model,” “Chongqing Experience,” “Chongqing Experiments,” or in the now suspended Chinese leftist websites as “the People’s Livelihood Line” (contrary to the de facto capitalistic party line of polarised development). Under the banner of pursuing “common prosperity,” the socio-economic component of the program put greater emphasis on equality, redistribution, and the role of the state-sector while also promoting foreign investments and encouraging micro-enterprises. Rather than pursuing the more brutal neoliberal forms of “accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey 2003) during the process of Chongqing’s urbanisation, the Chongqing program included a land commodification process that gave more benefits to farmers and allowed the local state to accumulate the appreciated land values, which were then deployed to provide cheap rental housing to the lower income working class. At the same time, the program’s “striking black” campaign aimed to reign in organised crime, street gangs, and the underground economy to make

the Chongqing urban space safe for the ordinary people. Concurrently, its “singing red” campaign aimed to promote moral values, uplift the public spirit, and to re-establish the CCP’s cultural leadership by reclaiming its revolutionary, or red, traditions. As well, the program reinvigorated the CCP’s “mass line” tradition by compelling officials to reconnect themselves with the grassroots through a whole series of institutionalised practices, including requiring officials at all levels to go into the villages, peasants’ households, and the fields to eat together, live together and work together with the peasants (Huang 2011a; 2011b; Gao 2011; Cui 2011; Lu 2011).

To be sure, Bo never explicitly called his program “the Chongqing Model,” and his experiments were controversial from the onset. The work-in-progress nature of these experiments had also led many sympathetic observers of these developments to refrain from calling it a “model.” However, even Western journalists had acknowledged Bo’s popularity and the political threat he posed to the CCP central leadership during China’s once-a-decade year of political transition. The *New York Times* wrote: “Mr. Bo, 62, had won widespread popularity and become a rival to the party’s mainstream leaders with an aggressive effort to create an egalitarian society with hints of neo-Maoism in Chongqing” (Wines and LaFraniere 2012). The *Guardian* concurred: “Inequality was falling. Investment was rising. The apparent successes of the ‘Chongqing model’ generated such wide coverage that Bo risked outshining president Hu Jintao or his anointed successor, Xi Jinping” (Watts and Branigan 2012). It would be impossible to discredit Chongqing’s pursuits for “common prosperity” with a simple invocation of the Cultural Revolution.

In the aftermath of Bo’s downfall and in line with the CCP central leadership’s attempt to cover up a leadership division, let alone an ongoing “line struggle” – after all, this Maoist term had been abandoned by the post-Mao CCP, the unfolding saga is in danger of being dismissed as even involving “factional struggles.” Writing for the *Financial Times*, Jonathan Fenby, for example, has gone so far as to characterise the affair as “not a matter of factional politics.” Instead, Bo is viewed as a “rogue element” falling foul of the established factions (Fenby 2012). However, it can be argued that Bo is a “rogue” because, ironically, and despite all the outrageous crimes he was now being suspected of having committed, he had managed to present himself as a more popular and serious heir to China’s revolutionary tradition than many of his more powerful Politburo fellows. Moreover, as if to underscore the anti-Bo propaganda line that he was an opportunist *par excellence*, Bo undertook the comprehensive political economic and socio-cultural experiments under the “common prosperity” banner in Chongqing at a time when China and the whole world is in search of potential alternatives to neoliberal capitalism in the aftermath of the 2008-2009 global financial crisis.

The implosion of Bo’s experiments in Chongqing started on February 6, 2012, when Wang Lijun, Bo’s right-hand man and Chongqing’s famed gang-bursting former police chief, attempted to seek political asylum in the U.S. consulate in Chengdu, but was later taken by central state security authorities to Beijing. Since then, the whole world has been watching this unfolding Chinese political drama. With a high-level and atypical Chinese asylum seeker in a U.S. consulate, the fall of a charismatic and popular Chinese princeling, and the murder of a British national who was suspected of having been a British spy, this unfolding succession drama in

China has turned out to be just as, if not more, attention grabbing than the Russian election and American election primaries in this eventful year in world politics. The secretive nature of Chinese elite politics and the brevity and opacity of all the Chinese official announcements so far have intersected with domestic and transnational media's hunger for sensational news, Chinese micro-bloggers' insatiable desire for participating in the latest discussions, and rival political forces' deliberate fabrication of rumours and opportunist information management (Wang 2012) to make the entire unfolding saga a futile ground for explosive political communication in all forms. These intensive information-generating and meaning-making processes by all kinds of symbolic manipulators, in turn, have contributed to and will continue to shape the very nature of the political drama itself. Despite the Chinese party-state's widely publicised efforts at controlling, rumours continue to fly high both within and beyond China.

Most intriguingly and underscoring the global dimension of Chinese communication politics today, the international media – from the Chinese language broadcasts of VOA and BBC to reputable and less reputable Anglo-American commercial media outlets, not to mention seemingly fringe overseas Chinese language websites such as Boxun.com and Falun Gong media outlets, became key players in this unfolding political drama. The Chinese party-state's battle with "hostile" overseas websites such as Boxun.com and Falun Gong media has been protracted and well-known. But when China's official media outlets ended up validating "rumours" first appeared in Boxun.com and Falun Gong's *Epoch Times*, one wonders, who were the sources for these "hostile" overseas media outlets? When domestic leftist websites were being closed down and "hostile" overseas websites were suddenly unblocked, could it be the case that Chinese party state insiders had deliberately leaked "rumours" to these "hostile" overseas media outlets and then selectively unblocked them to allow these "rumours" to flow back to China to manipulate the unfolding political drama? When Boxun.com, a self-styled "citizen journalism" website and well-known recipient of large grants from the U.S.'s National Endowment for Democracy, became one of the most influential players in this unfolding transnational communication war over the future direction of Chinese politics, one wonders what kind of "citizen journalism" is it? What is the level of collaboration between Chinese, U.S. and British authorities in this ostensibly "Chinese" political drama at a time when it has become more important than ever for state managers of these countries to co-manage the crisis-ridden globe political economy? What are the nature and dynamics of interaction between Chinese and foreign media? As Wang Hui put it: "when it became difficult to distinguish between the coverage in the *New York Times*, the *Financial Times*, the *Wall Street Journal* and the Falun Gong's outlet, the *Epoch Times*, or to differentiate them from Chinese newspapers and websites," there is a question as to "whether there is a single intelligence at work, or a network of forces collaborating to bring about a particular result" (Wang 2012).

As of the end of April 2012, Bo has been accused of all kinds of outrageous crimes in sensationalist reports in established Anglo-American print media outlets and overseas Chinese websites: selling party-state offices for money and transferring massive funds to overseas – as high as 8 billion Yuan, sleeping with more than 100 women, illegally wire-tapping Chinese President Hu Jintao, and even staging a 2002

airplane disaster that killed 112 people just because the wife of his then political rival was on board! Lin Chun's observation is especially illuminating:

*The current crisis may be the last milestone in the Chinese path of negating socialism. What is extraordinary about it is the alliance of a Communist leadership, rightwing anti-Communist factions inside and outside China (including Falun Gong), and western governments and press – a phenomenal example of 21st-century postmodern politics (Lin 2012).*

There is yet another important dimension to this astonishing 21st century post-modern global political communication spectacle. On April 26, 2012, Zhang Yannong, the Director of the *People's Daily*, or better, the CEO of the People's Daily press conglomerate, travelled to Shanghai's elite Fudan University to provide an exclusive "inside" account about how the paper came up with the above-mentioned three influential editorials in the campaign to denounce Bo and unify thoughts. In a clear attempt to define the competitive edge of his paper over its main rival, the Xinhua News Agency, Zhang spoke with great pride about how these editorials, along with eight related editorials in the paper's "Today's Topic" column, had "set the tone" for the Bo affair and had "served to create unity of thought for the Party and nation, and to reassure the public and stabilise the overall situation." In its treatment of the Bo Xilai affair, Zhang added, the *People's Daily* "had a powerful public opinion channelling capacity, and vested with high political value, news value and practical relevance" (People Net 2012). What Zhang did not make explicit in his speech is that the *People's Daily* was hoping to simultaneously convert its "high political values and news value" into its stock market value. Zhang spoke the day before People's Daily Online, operator of the website for the *People's Daily*, made its IPO debut at the Shanghai Stock Exchange on April 27, 2012. The first Chinese state-owned media outlet to be listed on the capital market, the shares are "selling like hot dumpling" (Millward 2012). As the Reuters reported, "China's People.cn Co Ltd finished 74 percent higher on its first day of trading in Shanghai after a \$219 million IPO as investors flocked to the state-backed news portal, giving it a bigger market value than the *New York Times*" (Lee 2012). The story continued: "demand for People.cn shares were so high that the stock was suspended for most of the afternoon, after triggering multiple stock exchange circuit breakers" (Lee 2012).

So, Bo has vanished from China's political stage as a speaking subject. Leftist websites that once supported Bo's policies were suspended. The "Red Alert" that *Time* magazine spoke of was gone. Now, transnational and China's state-controlled and market-driven media and Internet outlets can usher in a new cycle of accumulation, with the CCP central organ *People's Daily's* IPO leading the way.

## Contexts, Connections, and Issues: The Middle Class and Its Gazes

Conceived a year ago at the founding of the Centre for Contemporary Marxist Research in Journalism and Communication (CCMRJC) at Fudan University in May 2011, the purpose of this special issue was to shed light onto the latest Chinese communication and culture politics from a critical perspective that foregrounds class analysis. The purpose of the CCMRJC, as Lu Xinyu and I had written in announcing a May 2011 conference in preparation for its establishment, was to promote

dialogue among critical communication scholars and contribute to advancing global communication scholarship that is capable of not only addressing the multifaceted problems of globalised informational capitalism, but also grasping the complicated dynamics of ongoing social upheavals in a crisis-ridden global political economy. All the contributors to this special issue were at the conference.

At the time, Bo's Chongqing experiments were in their full swing, and Chongqing Satellite Television (CQTV) had just shocked the Chinese media field with the March 1, 2011 highly controversial move of suspending any commercial advertising in an attempt to establishing itself into a "public interest" channel. I was interested in this drastic de-commercialisation effort. Subsequently, I published a preliminary analysis of the communication and cultural dimensions of Chongqing's experiments to provoke domestic Chinese scholarly debates on the future directions of China's media reform. While acknowledging that de-commercialisation must serve as a necessary starting point, I argued for the importance of broad participation and open debates in determining the future directions of China's social transformation as core elements to establish a meaningful Chinese public sphere (Zhao 2011a).

In August 2011, CQTV inaugurated the weekly current affairs discussion program "Public Forum on Common Prosperity" (gongfu dajia tan), which promised to broaden debates about China's developmental path. Centring around the theme of "reducing the three divides [between rich and poor, urban and rural, coastal and interior regions], promoting common prosperity," the 45-minute program focused on "people's livelihood-oriented Chinese reform practices from a global perspective," and posited itself as a platform on which Chinese political and academic leaders could "face squarely the contradictions and conflicts resulting from China's current uneven development, and respond to the needs for theoretical explorations" (Chongqing Satellite Television 2011). Guest-anchored by Yang Du, a professor from the Business School of Renmin University of China in Beijing, the program combined in-studio panel discussions with mini-documentaries, street interviews with ordinary people, as well as micro-blogger participation. It positioned itself in the Chinese national television market as the only large scale current affairs show dedicated to the theme of "common prosperity" – an issue, as CQTV claimed in the program's online launching publicity material, the CCP could not, and must not, delay in addressing. As leading anti-neoliberal and socialist-committed scholars such as Cui Ziyuan and Wen Tiejun who had largely been invisible in other television outlets became forum guests to put forward their visions for a more equitable and sustainable Chinese developmental path, the program threatened to resemble the post-1989 rally of liberal and neoliberal scholars on the column and forum pages of the *Nanfang Weekend*. As I will explain in more detail in the next article in this special issue, as a flagship market-oriented subsidiary of the Guangdong provincial party organ *Nanfang Daily*, *Nanfang Weekend* has played an instrumental role in spreading neoliberal reform visions and championing liberal democratic values as "universal values." Relevant parts of the papers by Changchang Wu and Guoxin Xing extend my analysis with their discussions of the influential role of *Nanfang Weekend's* sister paper, *Nanfang Metropolitan News* in the micro-blog sphere and in news reporting respectively.

With the crackdown on Bo, the de-commercialisation of CQTV had become another manifestation of his accused political sin of trying to revive political sin of

trying to revive the Cultural Revolution. Even some of the above-cited “Public Forum on Common Prosperity” program publicity material at CQTV’s official website has been purged. As Wang Hui put it, “Wen’s rhetorical invocation of the Cultural Revolution served to single out the Chongqing experiment and seal it up, like the Cultural Revolution itself, as a forbidden subject, not available for public debate or historical analysis and fit only for political condemnation. Those associated with it can now be vilified as power-seekers, conspirators, propagandists or reactionaries who want ‘to turn back the wheel of history.’” (Wang 2012). And indeed, leading left-leaning scholars who had studied the “Chongqing model” and written favourably about it had been demonised as cheerleaders of Bo (Rong 2012).

Although none of the papers in this special issue directly deals with the Bo Xilai affair, this recent crisis at the highest political level grew out of profound contradictions in the Chinese political economy, and as I demonstrate in my paper on the post-1989 politics of intellectual publicity, profound divisions in the Chinese media and intellectual fields. Even though China’s post-Mao reform program was launched on the basis of a broad “anti-leftist” consensus among the political, intellectual and media elites, that consensus had collapsed by 1989, which saw a deep split in the CCP leadership and the downfall of first Hu Yaobang, and then Zhao Zhiyang. The violence of 1989 and the suppression of open debates on both the political nature and direction of the reforms paved the way for a whole decade of “neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics” (Harvey 2005) throughout the 1990s and the first few years of the new century. That decade saw the first relatively smooth transition of power from the Jiang Zemin leadership to the Hu Jintao leadership in 2002. It also witnessed the profound transformations in the Chinese media and intellectual fields that I describe in my paper.

However, by late 2004, the tensions between “neoliberal strategies” and “socialist legacies” had resulted in the “Lang Xianping storm,” which ignited a protracted debate on the directions of the reform process in the Chinese media and Internet. Underscoring the pivotal role of intellectuals in Chinese communication politics and the impact of global intellectual flows, Lang Xianping, a Taiwan-born, U.S.-trained and Hong Kong-based transnational elite intellectual made effective use of the market-oriented media and the Internet to launch a challenge against the excesses of unaccountable privatisation of state-owned enterprises, and the general lack of social justice and equity in the reform process. Among other things, the “Lang Xianping storm” brought the “liberal versus new left” intellectual fissure, which had been confined to narrower academic circles since the late 1990s, to the media and Internet sphere. Significantly, Internet discussions between late 2004 and early 2007 were overwhelmingly on the side of anti-neoliberal forces. As I wrote, the Chinese Internet “public” at the time was a constellation of broad social forces, including “old leftists” who were compelled to use the Internet because they had been deprived of mainstream media access, leading humanistic intellectuals who had access to mainstream media but aim to enlarge their audience, young university faculty members, social critics, grassroots leftist commentators who did not have ready access to mainstream media, white-collar workers, and university students (Zhao 2008a, 305).

However, elite proponents of further market reforms aggressively organised their publicity counter-offensive in an attempt to rein in a mobilised oppositional

public opinion that threatened to put pressure on the Hu-Wen leadership to significantly re-orient the reform process. Not only was Lang Xianping disparaged for pursuing personal fame and catering to populist Internet opinion, but also he was framed as an “outsider” who did not understand China’s domestic conditions. At a crucial moment of calling the capitalist class to arms in defending their class interests and becoming the dominant class in the realm of public consciousness, Zhang Weiying, a prominent neoliberal economist who has consistently spoken out for China’s rising capitalist class, called upon members of this class to pay special attention to what he considered to be hostile public opinion on the Internet because “in our country, public opinion in society can easily become political pressure force, and the political environment itself” (cited in Zhao 2008a, 319). In the subsequent neoliberal ideological counter-offensive, prominent neoliberal intellectuals and legal scholars such as Gao Shangquan, Wu Jinglian, Xu Xiaonian, Jiang Ping, Hu Puping (a.k.a. Zhou Ruijin) and He Weifang became highly vocal and aggressive in crusading for further neoliberal reforms and defending capitalistic interests both in the media and in off the record meetings. For example, a widely circulated *Finance* magazine article featuring interviews with some of the above people claimed that “Shooting at the Rich Will Result in Very Grave Social Consequences” (Zhao 2008a, 322).

In the end, while social unrests, media debates and popular social contestations since the mid-2000s were linked to a slowdown in the process of state firm privatisation and the Hu-Wen leadership’s heightened rhetoric on promoting social welfare in an attempt to contain explosive social tensions, neoliberal forces were able to not only contain and neutralize media and Internet critique against further capitalistic reforms, but also expand and consolidate capitalistic social relations in the Chinese political economy. The passage of the highly controversial Property Rights Law without any open debate at the March 2007 National People’s Congress, as I argued, marked “a major step toward the legitimation and consolidation of the economic power of China’s rising propertied class under the Hu Jintao leadership” (Zhao 2008a, 326). As Ying-fen Huang argues in her article, the enactment of this law “has the effect of deepening the class stratification and intensifying the tendency of “proletarianisation.” In the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis, domestic and global struggles over the future directions of China’s developmental path have intensified. By spring 2010, as my paper demonstrates, the *Nanfang Weekend*-led crusade against “new left” scholar Wang Hui had come to epitomise an even deeper division in the Chinese intellectual field. The case also exposed the more desperate and vicious tactics of China’s liberal and neoliberal intellectuals in crushing their opponents, as well as the destructive impacts of media commercialism and media instrumentalism on the part of *Nanfang Weekend* and its allied intellectuals. This spells out the moral bankruptcy of China’s semi-autonomous bourgeoisie “public sphere.”

Meanwhile, the economic situations, social dispositions and political consciousness of China’s “middle class,” an ambiguous and ambivalent social stratum that has been vested with so much hope as a democratising social force, have become more crucial as China faces a crossroad in its future developmental path. It is in this context that I wish to locate the articles by Ying-fen Huang and Changchang Wu respectively in this special issue. Both papers focus on communication politics

relating to class relations and social consciousness centring on China's middle class. In her paper, Huang analyses the 2009 popular drama series *Dwelling Narrowness* as an index to class relations, social consciousness, and the political economy and cultural politics of media and urban development in China. As a series targeting specifically at members of the urban middle class as the favoured consumers of the advertising industry, the show reveals a multifaceted processes of class formation against the drawback of what Huang calls "spectacular accumulation" in rapidly neo-liberalising urban China. The middle class is a fuzzy sociological category in the Chinese context, as Huang argues. Contrary to optimistic forecasts of a steadily growing "middle class" as the backbone of a "well-off" (xiangkang) Chinese consumer society, many among China's white collar workers, especially its young and most dynamic stratum, are becoming another type of "new poor." Unlike the laid-off workers, migrant factory workers, and disenfranchised farmers, members of this "new poor" hold university degrees, live in the city, have white-collar jobs and receive a steady income. Above all, they harbour very high expectations in consumption and lifestyle patterns, including private home-ownership in China's metropolis as the most important hallmark of "middle class" status. However, in the context of skyrocketing real estate prices and other economic and social hardships, they have not only become "the new poor in consumer society and poor consumers" in the material sense, but also endured poverty in their mental life and value disorientations (Wang 2012).

Although members of the urban middle class are resentful of official corruption and the bureaucratic-capitalist alliance that is responsible for their plights, as Huang's reading of the depiction of their social consciousness clearly underscores, their gaze is definitively cast upward. Toward this end, one of the show's young urban white collar protagonists literally ended up with sleeping with a highly corrupt official by becoming his mistress, in exchange for her sister's fulfilment of her home ownership dream and the lavish consumerist lifestyle that she had desired for herself. Meanwhile, members of this class displayed only disdain toward the working class, even though they have had to share the same living space with them. To the extent that there was any depiction of contestation against the dominant bureaucratic and capitalist class alliance by the working class, such contestation, especially radical working class consciousness, was neutralised in the show.

Wu's paper provides a further snapshot of the political gaze of the middle class as a class that is located between state and capital on the one hand and the working class on the other. The medium is micro-blog, or Weibo, a Chinese version of Twitter, which has emerged as the newest means of popular communication for China's middle class in the past couple of years. Reported to be around 300 million, the number of China's microblog accounts corresponds roughly to the size of China's urban middle class. I will discuss briefly the bias of Weibo as a specific communication forum later on, but for now, it is important to note that it turned out that the political consciousness of this micro-blogging middle class is not only trained upward toward a capitalist agenda, but also, as Huang also demonstrates in her paper, Western-ward. Guided by their micro-blogging intellectual vanguards, which can be seen as a consolidated and ever more radicalised version of the *Nanfang Weekend* and liberal intellectual alliance, or the "universal values" school in the "liberal versus new left" turned "universal values versus China model" debate, middle

class indignation against the corrupt state machinery and whatever that is left in the Chinese state's public ownership system reaches hysterical proportions.

In *Dwelling Narrowness*, the fictional middle class characters became complicit with the dominant class alliance of domestic bureaucratic-capitalists and transnational capitalists in order to secure their middle class lifestyle. Now, in the wake of the devastating high-speed bullet train accident on July 23, 2011 that had killed this highly priced new class of train services' almost exclusive middle class riders, the horrified middle class members in the real life drama become instantly radicalised in the microblog sphere as a vocal speech community, embracing the further neoliberalisation of the Chinese political economy, specifically, the privatisation of China's railway system, and even more radically, overall regime change, as the only means to their salvation. To be sure, there were powerful expressions of ambivalence and self-reflectivity on the part of some middle class micro-bloggers. As one micro-blog that Wu cites put it, "We are indignant... not because we want to eliminate unfairness, but because we want to place ourselves in advantageous positions in unfair situations." Even more revealing, however, is the extent to which micro-bloggers idealise the U.S. as the perfect middle class liberal democratic utopia vis-à-vis the Chinese political system.

Although Wu emphasizes in his paper that the outburst of a pro-capitalist "middle class consciousness" against the state ownership system in the micro-blog sphere was the result of a number of contingent factors and that it is "ephemeral," the political and policy impact of such micro-blog sphere mobilisation has been profound in China in the past two years. Wu's paper was selected for inclusion in this special issue out of 10 case studies of "micro-blog events" reported at a workshop organised by the above-mentioned Centre for Contemporary Marxist Research in Journalism and Communication between March 31 and April 1, 2012. The original version in Chinese was much longer and I have taken the liberty to drastically cut it and rewrite it in English. Just as Huang's paper and Wu's paper complement each other extremely well in their analysis of the ideological articulation of the middle class with a neoliberal agenda, the general conclusions of Wu's paper resonate well with the Shanghai workshop's other case studies of recent micro-blog based online opinion mobilisations. For example, the controversy over the illegal fundraising case of Wu Ying, ended up with a powerful neoliberal crusade for the further liberalisation of the financial sector for domestic and transnational financial capital (Yang and Wang 2012); the controversy over the case of farmers uprising in the Guangdong village of Wukan, turned the more fundamental economic problem of farmer's land ownership rights into a liberal celebration of village election (Xiong 2012).

In fact, we can now put together a narrative about the escalation of the neoliberal counteroffensive against anti-neoliberal forces and the capitalist re-orientation of middle class online opinion from the days of Internet discussion forums in mid 2000s to the latest micro-blog sphere in the early 2010s. The "Lang Xianping Storm" I had written about (Zhao 2008a) marked the beginning of an intellectual and Internet-based challenge against the further neoliberalisation of the Chinese political economy. This was followed by escalating efforts on the part of neoliberal forces to reign in the kind of "unfavourable" public opinion environment that Zhang Weiyong had spoken of in late 2005. As the 2008-2009 global financial crisis

further discredited neoliberalism and intensifies class conflicts, such struggles became uglier and increasingly brutal by spring 2010 in the media and Internet sphere. In the aftermath of the bulletin train accident in July 2011, we can see how neo-liberal and market-fundamentalist forces capitalised on a horrified and increasingly anxious and insecure middle class to aggressively advance a pro-capitalist reform agenda.

Even more disturbingly, as Wu makes it clear, in the debates over rumours and truths regarding the bulletin train accident, prominent liberal and neoliberal bloggers, including leading journalists at the *Nanfang Metropolitan News*, openly defended the legitimacy of rumours as a means to achieve their ideological ends. Here we see a dress rehearsal of the “rumour machine” that has been unleashed in the Bo saga. It is perhaps also within this context of intensified neoliberal efforts at reshaping the media and online “public opinion environment” toward a capitalist agenda that we can understand Bo’s “rogue” status in a new light. Bo is a “rogue” because his “Chongqing model” deviated from more radical models of neoliberalisation and because he had the political will to use heavy-handed measures to extract concessions from the bureaucratic and capitalists classes on behalf of the working class – even though he might have been very corrupt himself. It is also within this context that we can appreciate the accusation that not only Bo had made the officialdom miserable by compelling its rank and file members to reconnect themselves with the poor, but also inflicted a “psychological collapse of the gotten-rich first middle class” (Jiang 2012), where “the gotten-rich first middle class” is a code word for the newly enfranchised capitalist class.

And surely enough, neoliberal reformers, led by Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao, who was clearly identified by micro-bloggers as on “their” side in Wu’s study, have been sparing no time in resuming their neoliberal program while the whole nation was busy consuming the political spectacle of Bo’s downfall – a spectacle co-produced by a constellation of domestic and foreign state managers and symbolic manipulators of all sizes and shades. As Wang Hui reported, just as Bo was sacked, the State Council’s Development and Research Centre held a forum in Beijing at which prominent neoliberals such as Wu Jinglian and Zhang Weiying announced their program of privatising state enterprises, land, and liberalise the financial sector. On 18 March, the National Development and Reform Commission issued a report that “contained plans for the privatisation of large sections of the railways, education, healthcare, communications, energy resources and so on. The tide of neoliberalism is rising again” (Wang 2012).

Most importantly, a high-level U.S. delegation had arrived in Beijing by the first week of May 2012 for the 4th annual strategic and economic dialogue between Treasury Secretary Timothy F. Geithner, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton and their high-ranking Chinese counterparts. As I have already alluded to earlier, the U.S. government has been collaborating very closely with the Chinese authorities in managing Wang Lijun’s defection to the U.S. consulate in Chengdu and the sensitive information that Wang disclosed to the U.S. authorities. In fact, the U.S. government was seen as having played such a pivotal role in the entire Bo saga that many Chinese netizens have mused that U.S. President Obama has become the 10th member of the CCP Politburo Standing Committee: “After Wang Lijun ran into the [U.S.] consulate, the CCP Politburo added its 10th Standing Com-

mittee Member. He is Obama” (Kong 2012). On May 3, 2012, the *New York Times*, which has played a key role in reporting the whole Bo saga, including relaying U.S. government news about Wang Lijun at the opportune times, reported the results of the Sino-China strategic and economic talks with the headline “U.S. Stressed Concessions from China.” The paper reported that China “had made tangible concessions,” and that it “has gone further than ever ... in removing advantageous financing and regulatory conditions to state-owned enterprises” (Lowery 2012). Not surprisingly, one Chinese web forum characterised these agreements, which also include major Chinese concessions in the financial sector, as “a payback to the U.S.” and “a sellout” (Chaozheteng May 2012).

## Contexts, Connections, and Issues: The Working Class and Its Struggles

But the game is not over. It is necessary to bring in the role of China’s lower social classes in Chinese communication politics. Even though they have been rendered more or less invisible as communicative subjects in the dominant Chinese communication system, their struggles continue to play a role in China’s social transformation. As the respective articles by Guoxin Xing and Wanning Sun in this special issue demonstrate, Chinese workers, especially the large segment of migrant workers, have struggled to communicate their own voices, build their own intellectual and cultural capacities, as well as developing their own class consciousness, or what Xing calls the “proletarian public sphere” against all odds. Xing’s analysis of compounded pro-capitalist and anti-labour bias of *Nanfang Metropolitan News* and Xinhua News Agency in reporting the deadly and highly individualised capital and labour conflict provided further evidence illustrating how far China’s bureaucratic capitalist media system has deviated not only from its origins as “a proletarian press,” but also from the market-oriented media’s own self-proclaimed professional standards. As well, as Xing’s case study demonstrates, it was the legal system’s failure to secure the worker’s rights, as well as the capitalists’ violation of the worker’s legal right that led to a deadly confrontation between the worker and his managers. And it is within this context that one must understand the class-based and highly corrupt nature of China’s emerging “law and order” regime, a regime that neoliberal intellectuals and legal scholars have spared no effort in promoting and defending in their attacks against Chongqing’s heavy-handed “striking black” campaign.

However, as Xing’s historical overview of radical and autonomous working class communication practices from the early days of the Cultural Revolution to the 1989 pro-democracy movement underscores, a radical working class consciousness had long informed Chinese workers’ struggles against capitalistic exploitation in general and bureaucratic capitalism in particular. Similarly, contrary to the official media system’s neutralisation of China’s revolutionary legacies and the selective deployment of these legacies for the sole purpose of political legitimization, “red symbols” and revolutionary songs and slogans have been appropriated by the working class in their struggles against the new forms of exploitation in contemporary China. It is perhaps within the context of persistence working class resistance against China’s bureaucratic capitalist formation that one can also gain a new understanding of a real fear of the Cultural Revolution, or more broadly, China’s “red” revolutionary

tradition, in the current context. The Cultural Revolution had its moments of working class empowerment. Along with all the horrors of “class struggle”, it opposed “capitalist restoration,” and contained a radical egalitarian thrust. Moreover, not only the tactics, rhetoric, as well as the collective memories of the Chinese revolution continue to shape ongoing working class and peasant resistance against further capitalistic developments in China, but also the revolutionary ideologies of the Chinese revolution continue to provide resources for ongoing radical working class re-formation and online leftist mobilisation and ideological critique of the capitalistic reform process (Xing 2011; Zhao 2011b). For all these reasons, perhaps the dominant hegemonic bloc of domestic and transnational capitalists, Chinese and foreign state managers, and their aspiring middle class allies do have something to fear – with or without Bo’s “singing red” campaigns. Just as fascism remains a permanent temptation, the “red scare” remains a constant obsession. In today’s reformed and globally integrated China, this is no exception, even though the ‘red scare’ appears as the spectre of “the Culture Revolution”.

Today, as Xing’s paper underscores, the right to communication and online activism has become a life and death issue for workers. In Sun’s paper, we can see the beginning of Chinese migrant workers’ long revolution in cultural self-empowerment and working class consciousness formation. Specifically, she details how a small but growing number of migrant cultural activists are making creative use of digital media to create their own culture and to project their own voices “in debates on social inequality and citizenship.” As her nuanced ethnographic analysis of working class cultural activism underscores, the process of forging a collective migrant working class identity is a painstaking one. It not only involves self-discovery on the part of workers, but also “the extent to which they are inducted and initiated into the technology-enabled process of politicisation and socialisation.” Moreover, the results are often “contingent on the acquisition of a techno-political literacy on the part of both individual workers and the worker advocacy groups.” Analogous to the pivotal role of mainstream media and neoliberal intellectuals in spearheading middle class consciousness formation toward a capitalist agenda in Huang’s and Wu’s papers respectively, one witnesses in Xing’s paper the pivotal role of organic working class intellectuals in the articulation of radical working class consciousness, and in Sun’s paper the involvement of “urban, middle-class and transnational cultural elites” in the initiation of migrant working class consciousness. Although there is no comparison in the scale and impact of such involvements, clearly not all members of the middle class are allying themselves with the ruling classes. At the same time, as all the papers underscore, it is important to acknowledge the experiential, affective, imaginative, and moral dimensions of class consciousness formation. It is also within the realm of the experiential, affective and moral dimensions that one can perhaps understand the popular appeals of not only Chongqing’s “striking black” and “singing red” campaigns, but also the “mass line” revitalisation efforts.

Finally, by way of concluding this introduction, I wish to draw attention to yet another issue that underpins all the papers in this special issue, that is, the class politics of technology and cultural form. Along with the Bo affair that I discuss in this introduction, my paper and Xing’s underscore the pivotal role of the news and informational media genre, including rumours in the increasingly pervasive form of

“unconfirmed reports” and the growing trend toward sensationalism and tabloid journalism. As class conflicts become more intensive within and beyond national borders within the terrain of globalised informational capitalism, the “information war” is becoming more intense and multifaceted, concurrently more open and more coveted, and above all, more consequential. For its part, Huang’s paper foregrounds how the control of the “commanding heights” of the society’s means of cultural production by the ruling class alliance has made the television drama series the most powerful and expensive story-telling form for the cultivation of dominant capitalistic ideology. Further, she demonstrates how the centrality of this cultural form in the process of class formation in favour of the capitalist class has been multiplied and reinforced through the digital technologies of dissemination and the active involvement of “prosumers” in online discussions of the television drama series.

In Wu’s paper, one witnesses the astonishing power of China’s microblog sphere, especially Sina Weibo, in rallying the middle class toward a neoliberal reform agenda. Although micro-blog, or Weibo, is considered as the Chinese version of Twitter, Weibo is different from Twitter in a number of ways. First, whereas Twitter can only accommodate 140 English characters, which do not amount to many words, Weibo, on the other hand, allows more words in Chinese. Second, whereas a Twitter post can only accommodate 5 comments and displays up to 50 re-tweets in the form of (50+), Weibo accommodates unlimited number of comments and displays the exact number of forwards (Dingxin Zhao 2012). These features are well illustrated in the examples that Wu cites in his paper. As Dingxin Zhao pointed out, these features have not only allowed Weibo to substitute blogs in China, but also amplify the role of “Internet Water Army” (i.e., ghostwriters posting online comments with particular content to influence social media conversation). Apparently, not only “zombies” or “phantom” fans haunt online statistics, but also “they can be bought and sold online for as little as 4 Yuan (63 cents) a thousand” (Xinhua Net 2011). All these have made it easier for dominant opinion leaders to emerge. Consequently, “there is a greater danger for netizens to be manipulated” in the Chinese micro-blog sphere. This analysis, in the context of Wu’s account of the origins of Sina Weibo and its politicisation by the “vanguard of China’s twitter class” in the aftermath of the prominent role of social media in the Arabic spring, assumes great importance in understanding the ideological orientation of China’s micro-blog sphere.

Finally, Sun drives home the social nature of media technologies and particular cultural forms when she describes how domestic workers, armed with the video camera and all the technical skills and politicisation imparted by their middle class organic intellectuals, were not able to capture their working experience inside the private homes of the upper class on the camera. This, as she puts it, “seems to fly in the face of the truth-claim made on behalf of documentary as a genre which has a natural advantage of becoming more ‘true.’” As she writes: “It is here we see the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of producing ethnography of work and life from the point of view of the subjugated class ... The dominant class refused to be subject to the gaze, and has the power to act out this refusal.” If Chinese workers have no choice but to embark on a truly bottom up cultural revolution, then this will be a very long march indeed.

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